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RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHUP #0629/01 0871647
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 281647Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8837
INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 BUDAPEST 000629

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/NCE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [HU](#)

SUBJECT: HUNGARY'S ELECTIONS: SNAPSHOT FROM WESTERN
HUNGARY (C-RE6-00145)

REF: SECSTATE 22644

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Contacts in Gyor, Sopron, Szombathely, Csorna, and Kormend predicted to Embassy representatives in March 21-24 meetings that opposition party FIDESZ would continue to dominate western Hungary in the April general elections. A majority of interlocutors believed that FIDESZ would again win by a margin of approximately twenty percent in the six counties that make up the northwest quadrant of Hungary (Fejer, Komarom-Esztergom, Gyor-Moson-Sopron, Veszprem, Vas and Zala). Local politicians and voters from across the spectrum pegged FIDESZ's dominance to church support, party discipline, and widespread voter dissatisfaction with the Gyurcsany government. Many local observers predicted that a large number of individual constituency races would fall to FIDESZ in the first round.

Church Says & Bless Viktor Orban8

¶2. (SBU) Observers across the spectrum in meetings March 21 - 24 in Gyor, Sopron, Szombathely, Csorna, and Kormend reported that the Roman Catholic Church is overtly backing opposition party FIDESZ's election efforts. Most significantly, Easter, the most important religious day in Hungary, falls in the "critical period" between the April 9 and 23 elections. Some alleged the Church's involvement contributes significantly to the already conservative voting tendencies in western and northwestern Hungary. Although FIDESZ campaign organizers Akos Kara and Robert Borsi in Gyor told Emboffs their party does not work formally with the Church, Csorna mayor Jozsef Papp (MSZP) disagreed. He pointed to recent appearance in regional churches of flyers that read "Bless Viktor Orban." The connection is even personal, said MSZP MP Lazzlo Kranitz in Sopron, pointing to Orban's close relationship with Bishop Lajos Papai of the Gyor diocese.

¶3. (SBU) FIDESZ Mayor Istvan Bebes in Kormend agreed that a connection between FIDESZ and the Roman Catholic Church exists, but downplayed its significance. The Church is "a minor factor," said the mayor, because less than fifteen percent of Hungarian Catholics attend church regularly and "not all of them are FIDESZ supporters."

Schools Have No Room for Debate

¶4. (SBU) Politics may not be taboo in church, but it certainly is in school, according to an English teacher at Csorna's Janos Hunyadi High School. This educator said her students would like to engage in "debate and discussion of political issues," but the school expressly discourages the practice. Teachers and administrators agreed that Hungary's schools are not, in general, an open conduit for debate. Although Hungary does not have laws prohibiting political discussions, school administrators across Hungary are hesitant to condone political discourse. Many remember the "firestorm of hysteria" whipped up by widely publicized media accusations that "schools exerted undue political influence" in the 2002 elections.

FIDESZ Strategy Cements Individual Western Races

¶5. (SBU) Emboffs also visited Szombathely, where FIDESZ MP Csaba Hende, s campaign manager Viktor Lazary offered insights into his party, s national campaign structure. (Note: In meetings with other FIDESZ campaign managers, Emboffs have found them generally reluctant to provide details about the mechanics of the party's campaign apparatus.) Lazary said he "reports directly to one of five regional directors" for communications, and that specific campaign messages come directly from national campaign director Antal Rogan. According to Lazary, local managers only have discretion over placement of signs and "decorating the office." Lazary declined to explain how FIDESZ could afford hundreds of prominently-displayed (and expensive) streetlight banners in Szombathely. He described how volunteers had hit the streets and the phones in mid-March, armed with voter-preference data gleaned over

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the past four years from FIDESZ information drives. He said the volunteers would continue their fullcourt press "until election day," reporting their contact statistics to local managers, who then forward that information through regional directors back to Budapest. Lazary averred that FIDESZ was in "no danger of losing its twenty-percent margin of victory" from 2002.

Basketball Mayor Popular With Voters But Not FIDESZ Party Leadership

¶6. (SBU) In Kormend, Mayor and MP Istvan Bebes said "privatized medicine works here," to the chagrin of his own (FIDESZ) party officials. He said his decision to privatize the regional hospital isolated him from the party leadership, especially from FIDESZ President Orban and his proposed deputy, and former Minister of Health, Istvan Mikola because it goes against the party's preference for continued state ownership of hospitals. Bebes said his very low ranking on the county and national party lists is evidence that he and Orban "do not have a friendly relationship." Bebes does not mind his estranged relationship with the party, because he "will win his constituency in the first round anyway." The six-foot, ten inch mayor was earlier a star player in the Hungarian Basketball Association, and still enjoys residual popularity from his days on the court.

Miscalculation Costs MSZP Csorna Mayor a Parliament Seat

¶7. (SBU) Csorna Mayor Jozsef Papp (MSZP) echoed Bebes in describing his difficulties with his party. In Papp's case, it was the governing MSZP (Socialist) party. Papp said that his standing within the MSZP had been hurt by his decision not to run for county party chairman in 2003.

Instead, he served as Interior Minister Monika Lamperth, s deputy on the Association of Leftist Local Governments (BOK). His decision had cost him the support of the party leadership and Papp had accordingly been moved far down the party list. Papp now faces an uphill battle against FIDESZ Parliament faction head Janos Ader, to whom he lost in the first round in 2002. Unless Papp wins his constituency in the first round this time (an unlikely prospect), his poor rankings (number four on the county list and 159 on the national list) will mean his only hope is that current county party chairman Csaba Molnar and German-Hungarian School director Zsuzsana Toth win their individual-constituency races, thus dropping off the party lists and moving Papp up the pecking order.

¶8. (SBU) According to Papp, FIDESZ will duplicate its twenty percent margin of victory in 2006, as demographics have not changed in the traditionally conservative Györ-Sopron-Moson County. Nationally, the MSZP is stronger and more disciplined under Gyurcsany,s leadership than it was in 2002. However, Papp believed that neither Gyurcsany nor the pork he is sending Csorna by way of roads and renovations will be enough to return him to Parliament.

A FIDESZ Mule Could Win Sopron, Says Kranitz

¶9. (SBU) On March 22, Sopron's MSZP Chairman and MP Laszlo Kranitz told Emboffs that he expects low turnout and a FIDESZ victory in his city. He would be satisfied if FIDESZ did not increase its 2002 15-point margin of victory over the MSZP. (Note: In the last election, FIDESZ received 51 percent in Györ-Sopron-Moson County; MSZP received 36 percent.) Kranitz said people vote for parties not personalities in Sopron, and he claimed that "a deaf mule could run for FIDESZ and win Sopron." Kranitz expects at least ten percent less turnout in 2006 than four years ago. "People are tired of politics and of going to the ballots every six months." (Note: In the past four years, Sopron has seen two by-elections and the European Parliament election.)

¶10. (SBU) Kranitz, a member of Parliament,s Foreign Affairs Committee, predicted there will be no change in Hungary,s foreign policy or the strength of the transatlantic relationship, no matter what the election results. He said President Bush,s positive remarks on Hungary,s National Day and recent visits by Prime Minister Blair and President Putin, resonated well with MSZP

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voters. Kranitz said, in order to boost his international image among domestic voters, Orban made a "desperate run to Berlin and Vienna" to see leaders (who reportedly refused to come to Budapest).

Gyor Mayor May Be Sole Victory for MSZP

¶11. (SBU) FIDESZ campaign organizers Akos Kara and Robert Borsi, told emboffs that FIDESZ will win six of seven MP seats in Györ-Moson-Sopron county. Györ,s MSZP Mayor Jozsef Balogh, the former Communist whose approval rating has increased with each election since 1990, is the only question mark in the FIDESZ-dominated county. Sources estimate Balogh has a 15-point lead over his party and a five-point lead over FIDESZ rival and party spokesman Peter Szijjarto. Mayor Balogh (like the MSZP) is more popular in the urban areas, and lags in the countryside where "socialists and liberals have disappeared" in the past ten years. Szijjarto,s frequent attacks on Gyurcsany and the MSZP are "attracting voters" said Kara and Borsi because he is "willing to standup and tell the truth." (Szijjarto has been called "Gyurcsany,s pit bull" for his

aggressively negative campaign tactics.)

Independent Sopron Mayor Says Civil Service Reform is Past Due

¶12. (SBU) Sopron Mayor Dezso Walter reflected on the likelihood of sweeping civil service reforms and the effects local mayor's will feel in the fall elections, if the promised reforms occur, saying the reforms are "important and past due." Walter, an independent mayor that sympathizes with the MSZP, declared that he plans to downsize city hall by ten percent after the April national elections, regardless of who wins. He is sure that both Gyurcsany and Orban are determined to reform public administration &that is way overdue in Hungary.⁸

MIEP is Alive But Not Well in Sopron

¶13. (SBU) Dean of the West Hungary University Forestry Department Karoly Meszaros told Emboffs that rumors of considerable MIEP (a far-right party) influence among students are ungrounded. Meszaros said that two former MIEP MPs Csaba Lentner and Erzsebet Gidai are professors at the university, but that neither the faculty nor students take their views seriously. In fact, politics in general "cause little excitement" among the student body. The most spirited debates among students, said Meszaros are "over E.U. agricultural policies" and their effect on Hungary. Meszaros said the political "temperature of the students" is pro-FIDESZ, but said he doubts students will "turn out to vote" in substantial numbers.

Have / Have-Not Gap Widens for Average Hungarians

¶14. (SBU) Economic frustrations run high in western Hungary, s Vas County, according to a group of "average Hungarians" who said unfair competition by multinational companies and inadequate domestic social policy are "starving Hungarian workers." The group identified themselves as "lower income" and ranged in age from approximately 25-55 years old. Two couples in the group have children and support pensioner parents on a single income. One spouse in each couple recently lost his/her job. Said a young lady in her twenties, "at least under communism people knew they had a job, a place to live and enough money to meet their needs." A middle-aged couple shared this frustration, and agreed with the FIDESZ slogan "we are worse off than four years ago." They all blamed the Gyurcsany government for "allowing uncertainty" to pervade Hungary. Sources in the region say "cheap labor jobs" that sprang up in the early 1990s have moved further east (where taxes are lower), leaving the region,s largely unskilled populace unable to compete for higher-paying jobs. Average Hungarians believe the income gap in Vas is growing, as the middle class, in their view, shrinks.

Comment

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¶15. (SBU) Dissatisfaction among voters and a deeply-rooted conservatism seem to suggest an almost certain victory for FIDESZ in western Hungary. All interlocutors agreed the Roman Catholic Church is more involved in politics in this cycle, than in any previous election. Most observers agreed that party affiliations trumps personality in western Hungary, a factor that also may increase FIDESZ's chances.

¶16. (U) Visit U.S. Embassy Budapest's classified website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/budapest/index.cfm
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